

Why Have A Family Alter?

By Arvid Carlson

Arvid Carlson:

Today, I should like to read for you a very strange text for a very practical subject: why have a family altar? And the text comes out of the Book of Revelation, chapter 8 verses 3 to 5, "And another angel came and stood at the altar having a golden censor, and there was given to him much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of All Saints up on the golden altar, which was before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand."

Someone has defined a home as a little corner of the very bosom of God, where faithful souls are held close to the infinite father-heart, and carried safely to the home above. This definition, I think, must be qualified by the word Christian. Otherwise, it expresses a very noble sentiment.

There are alarming signs of the decline of the home in these days. To the growing generation, the home is a restaurant where they take their meals, a motel where they sleep at nights, a theater where they can view all the old movies they desire, a tavern where wine, beer and cocktails are served at intervals, and a club where parties of one kind or another are given. Children see their parents dance, but they never see them kneel to pray. They hear the voice of quarreling, but never in the reading of the Bible. Parents take their children to the theater, but they never take them to Sunday school or to church. It goes what, goes without saying that it is the avowed purpose of the enemy of our souls to destroy the nation's home life. This is his chief strategy in relation to the internal disruption of our social structure. Amazingly enough, one out

of three homes in America is working hand in glove with him in this endeavor. He assaults the home in a thousand ways and with a thousand trials: financial, social, economic, physical, and moral. Even Christian homes are not immune from these attacks. This is the reason why we need to search for a deterrent. What (pause) in the last analysis will safeguard our homes from such devastation. Is there any answer to the moral deterioration of our family life? I believe there is. I do not say that it is an automatic safeguard against the inroads of Satan, but I am firmly convinced that the family altar is just such a bulwark against such attacks. And I'd like to have you today explore with me, first of all, the place of the family altar in the home.

May I begin by saying that it is absolutely central to our national culture? This nation was founded on the kind of homes in which prayer was as common as the evening meal, and it can only be perpetuated by homes of this type. It is something less than sanity to believe that God can bless America, if its homes have allowed the altar fires to burn out.

One of America's greatest orators during the Civil War period, was Henry Grady. Mr. Grady was once invited to visit Wall Street in New York. He came away saying, "It's the heartbeat of America." Later, he visited Washington, D.C. and said, "This is the heart of America." But still later in a rural community, he made an address and was invited to stay with a godly farmer-family for the night. After they had enjoyed some fellowship, they sat down to an evening snack and the farmer said, "Mr. Grady, it is the custom around here to read the Bible and pray twice each day. You read, and I'll pray." Mr. Grady read a portion out of Psalms, and the old man prayed. He pleaded with God for the nation, for their church, for his loved ones, and for the stranger within the gates. That night, Henry Grady lay sleepless upon his bed, reflecting on the travels of the past few days. He said to himself, "I was mistaken. Wall Street and Washington, D.C. are not the heartbeat of America. This is the heart of America. It is homes like

this that have made our nation great, and will keep it safe and secure. However, if the homes of our land are disrupted, and the family altars are broken down, and our children are permitted to grow up without religious teaching and training, then Wall Street and Washington can never save us from chaos and ruin." Those words were spoken many years ago, but I think they are more true today than they've ever been before.

Furthermore, the family altar is commanded by scripture, first by specific admonitions such as in Deuteronomy 6 verses 4 through 11, Jeremiah 10 verse 25, and as we have pointed out before, Ephesians Chapter 6:1-4. Secondly, it is commanded by many illustrations. The first thought of the patriarchs, for example, was an altar. There were two altars in the worship of Israel, the altar of sacrifice and the altar of incense. The latter, symbolical of the Ministry of Intercession and Prayer. And as we have also previously pointed out, the early church began in a house. Thirdly, the scriptures imply and allude to the practice constantly. In Luke 10 verses 38 to 42, you know the story well, the Lord points out that Mary had chosen the better portion because she was desiring of sitting at the feet of Jesus. "One thing is needful," he said, and the implication is clear, and the needful thing is to take moments out of a busy schedule to spend in his presence. The Marthas of our homes are essential, but the Marys are also very much essential.

In the third place, the family altar is essential to fulfill God's purposes for the family. For he intended it to be the center of family worship. Children are a heritage of the Lord, and we don't have any right to do with them as we please, but as he pleases. God intended that our children should retain a sacred memory of home, and carry it with them throughout all of life. Someone put it well when he said that, "Sin may sweep over the soul like a devastating fire. Sorrow may quench every joy and hope, but the memory of a sweet and blessed home lives on

like a solitary star, burning in the deep of the night. And even in the midst of sin, its picture floats before the mind like a vanishing dream." How important, then, to embellish that picture with memories of sacred moments when God draws near, and when the family feels his presence and his great power.

Fourthly, the family altar is demanded by our times. This is a terrific age in which to rear a family. Every conceivable device has been invented to draw our children away from home. Families move frequently. Mothers are at work in industry when they don't need to be. Homes are broken by divorce and delinquency, and the world itself has invaded the sanctuary of the home through the television media. It is estimated that a child up through the years of high school spends 15,000 hours in front of a TV set; actually more time that he spends in school. If we ever needed a balancer in family affairs, it is today and I cannot think of anything else that will fill the bill other than the family altar. Hearts are drawn--hearts that are drawn together at God's feet every day cannot get very far apart, someone as well said. And families which pray together will certainly state gather.

Fifthly and lastly, the family altar is in keeping with our evangelical tradition. Most evangelical churches preach it. Few practice it. It has been estimated that less than 11% of the families of any average evangelical church has a consistent prayer altar. Herod isn't the only one who slaughtered the innocents. At the funeral service of a rich man's son who had been shot in a drunken brawl, the father flung himself over the coffin and cried, or God, if you will give me back my boy, I'll give up all the dirty dollars I've piled up while neglecting his young life. At that point, my dear friends, it is too late to think of a spiritual inheritance; to leave a neglected son.

Having looked at the place of the family altar, I'd like to have you consider, just for a moment or two, some of the problems related to it. And there are a few. The first one is that of

time. It's not exactly the problem of quantity, but of timing. The family units scatter from home at variable times. Of necessity, each family must determine its own pattern. If it is not possible to have family worship in the morning, try for it in the evening at the evening meal. This practice is as much a matter of discipline and habit as brushing one's teeth. Prayer time is never available. We all know that. It never knocks at our door. It must be forcibly captured and forcibly held.

The second problem is that of materials. These two will vary with age and circumstance. Materials must grow as the family grows. The honeymoon home can use solid portions, but when tiny tots make their way into the home, adaptations must be made. And so it goes in the nurturing and the maturing of the family. May I insert here just one word of caution, and I hope not to the detriment of anyone. Be sure the bible is utilized. Devotional books are a dime a dozen, and can too often become a crutch. Read the word and allow the children to participate in the reading of the word.

The third problem is that of a divided family. If one parent is not a Christian, should the Christian parent carry on the devotions? I would have to say an unqualified yes, on the basis of what Paul tells us in First Corinthians, Chapter 7 verses 7--verses 12 through 17, "Even one Christian parent is responsible before God for the nurturing of the children." It may be necessary to work around either the absence or the hostility on the part of the unbelieving partner, but it has to be done at all costs. No child should be robbed of the privilege of hearing the Bible read in his own home.

We come then to the pattern of the family altar. How should it be conducted? What can be done to make it interesting and appealing, rather than stereotyped and forced? This leads me to say that we must avoid the stereotyped approach like the plague. Too often, the family altar has been murdered by a lack of deliberate planning. If we placed as much emphasis on this kind

of worship as we do on church worship, I think it would become much more meaningful. Preparation, you see, is the key to the project. Then, too, we must avoid the authoritarian approach. It is true that we as Christian parents must command our children after us, but it is also true that children expect to be disciplined. On the other hand, force without reason results in rebellion. Let the parent lead instead of dry. This is much more an attitude than a practice. In the family, if the family worship is made sufficiently interesting, and if it is approached with reasonable enthusiasm, it will never lose its appeal.

And finally, let's encourage family participation. Most of the pictures of family worship portray the father holding the Bible, and apparently doing it all. This is an unforgivable mistake. What better time and place for children to learn to read and pray than at the family altar? Sure, it takes time and sure it takes patience. But let us remember that we are growing oaks, and not squash. If I'm talking to parents today, may I remind you that you will not be thanked for the wealth, education or station you leave to your children? I rather think they will thank you most for a godly home; for holy moments when God was near, for memories of a family circle around the throne of God. May this be the kind of a home that you and I shall rear to the glory of God, and to the praise of his name. And may the kingdom be built of homes like this, now and forever more in Christ, our savior's name. Let us pray.

Our God and Father, once again, we're grateful for the joy and the privilege of sharing the good word of God with so many of our friends on this broadcast. We thank you for every listener. We thank you for every supporter of the Biola hour. We thank you for every contributed to the Biola campus. We thank you for every prayer warrior. We thank you for every Christian home. And we pray that every home may have this altar lit and burning brightly, and prayer

ascending daily to the throne of grace. For we ask it in the name of Christ and in his precious name, amen.

Speaker 2:

Now, all right. We'll go. (10 seconds of silence).

Arvid Carlson:

Our last message today is a message on the subject of praying for the conversion of our loved ones, and I take my text from Acts chapter 16 verse 31, where the jailer was told to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he would be saved, and his house.

Perhaps we could specifically title the topic: can we pray with assurance for the conversion or salvation of our loved ones? This subject has always been a troublesome one for many Christians, and not the least the one who addresses you today. Although one cannot know for certain what takes place in the last moment of a man's life, it is almost a certainty that at least one member of my own family has gone into eternity without Christ. And how many more will do so remains to be seen. And yet, my immediate family has been the subject of many prayers, both from myself and from godly sisters, who have prayed for their brothers much longer than I.

This then becomes a question of vital interest and importance. Nearly every believer has some unsaved loved ones. Although flesh and blood ties will not be binding in heaven. All of us are surely interested in the salvation of our loved ones before that of anyone else. Indeed, the question I raise is a very delicate one. All of us know of some children of godliest parentage who have gone eternally lost. And incidentally, even the godliest of parents do not make the best parents. It is possible to be godly without being wise. Some fathers whose position on biblical

principles cannot be questioned have ruled with an iron hand and turned their sons into the ways of rebellion and disobedience. This kind of experience is common to many. We cannot stand in judgment over other people's failures. The heartbreak is sad enough, and even if we could, we must still leave the matter of unanswered prayer with God.

Today, I would like to approach this question from the standpoint of condition, of assurance, and of necessity. First of all, we may pray with assurance for our loved ones on the bases of certain conditions. We may do so, when we have paid the price of intercession. Let us never forget that the unregenerate, even if they are members of our own family, are held captive by Satan. He does not loosen his hold on them very quickly. Some answers to prayer come easier than others. For some things, we need only ask for others we must seek, and for still others we must knock. Williams is correct in pointing out that these verbs in Luke 11 verses 5 to 11, are all in the present tense, indicating continuity. In other words, we are to keep asking, keep seeking and keep knocking. Abraham prayed fervently for his nephew, Lot, in Genesis 18, and then proceeded to trust God for his deliverance, but not until after he had engaged in a continuing battle of intercession. We may pray with such assurance, if we have lived a consistent life before our children.

Our children will not respect us if we are one thing at church and another thing at home. Every parent should be able to affirm with Joshua as old, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. "All the tragedy of parenthood which cares little or nothing for the salvation of the family. I can well remember a boyhood relative who was asked if he wanted to accept Christ. His answer was devastating. He said, "If my dad is a Christian, I don't want to be one." Personally, I felt he was evading the issue. On the other hand, he may never have gathered the impression that his dad cared anything about his spiritual condition. Godly concern never goes

unrewarded. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, wept and prayed for a son, and God heard her prayer and she gave him on to the Lord. Eli the priest, on the other hand, evidenced no concern over his two sons, whom the scriptures call worthless men. And in 1 Samuel Chapter 3:13, we find God's judgment upon Eli for this neglect. The Lord said, "I have told him that I'll judge this house forever for the iniquity which he knoweth, because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not." When a young wife told her pastor that she would be willing to die if only her husband might be saved, an older woman who overheard the remark and knew the situation very well said, "What a pity that she is not willing to live, that he might be saved."

We may pray for our loved ones when we have done the utmost to bring them to Christ. Prayer alone will suffice when all other means have been exhausted. One of the most comforting passages in this respect is Isaiah 49 verse 25, where the Lord promises that he "will contend with him that contendeth with the," and he says, "I will save thy children." Undoubtedly there comes a time and place when prayer alone will avail.

But there are other means as well, which must be exercised for the salvation of our children. At any cost, let's keep the prayer altar burning. Let's demonstrate loving the home; parent to parent and parent to children. Let us express our concern for their waywardness, even if it hurts both of us to do so. If it doesn't matter to us, you see, then the chances are that it will not matter to them. If we as parents do not think they need to be saved, they will hardly think so either. Thus, there are conditions to any prayer of assurance for the salvation of our loved ones.

There is also the possibility we not only may pray for our loved ones with assurance, we can pray for their salvation with confidence, and we can do so for several reasons. First, because of general promises in God's word, this request should be treated no differently than any other. For example, I think such a request is covered by Matthew 18:19, "where two agree is touching

anything that they shall ask, it shall be done on to them of my father, which is in heaven." Or, "If you abide in me and my words abide you, ye shall ask what she will, and it will be done unto you," John, 15:7. Or, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avail it much in its working," James 5 verse 17. We could multiply these by dozens. There is nothing inside the realm of God's will, that prayer cannot touch, and the salvation of the lost is most assuredly in the will of God. For he is not willing that any should perish, not even any of our loved ones.

But there is a second reason for praying with confidence, namely the great number of special promises and specific illustrations which bear upon our subject. The Philippian jailer was promised the salvation of his household. Was this merely a prophecy concerning his family? Or is it a principle which we can all appropriate for ourselves? It must be concluded that faith can claim any promise in the word, including Act 16:31. Paul thanked God for the faith in Timothy, which was also in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice; 2 Timothy 1:5. The Lord told Jeremiah, "Leave thy fatherless children with me, and I will preserve them alive," Jeremiah 49 verse 11.

If I were to venture one more reason for this prayer of assurance, I would cite the fact that God is particularly interested in household salvation. This, as previously mentioned, does not imply that households are automatically saved simply because one parent or both believe. However, it does mean that God desires the salvation of the entire family. God is the author of both the home and the church. He full well knows that the home is the nursery of society, and he is most anxious to plant whole households in this world as a witness to his saving grace. Noah was told, "Come thou and all thy house into the ark," not a child or an in-law, was to be left out. Joshua included his whole household in his affirmation of faith. Rehab's family, as recorded in

Joshua chapter 2 were to be saved in its entirety. The apostle Paul could say that he had seen the salvation of the households of Crispus, Gaius and Stephanas.

I am fully aware of the objections which might be raised at this point. Someone says, "I cannot pray for the unsaved, including my loved ones, for I do not know who is to be elected and who isn't." May I answer that neither you nor anyone else does either. Election is God's business, not yours, not mine. Dwight L. Moody used to say that "The whosoever wills are the elect, and the whosoever wants are not." That is a weak excuse for not interceding for the lost. But someone else says it is so difficult to deal with one's own family, and I immediately concur. A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country. Even the brethren of Jesus did not believe on him. "A man's foes," he said, "shall be they of his own household." But deal with them, we must, and pray for them. We must if they are to be saved. Perhaps someone else is saying, "My children are free moral agents. God will not save them against their will." Of course, that is true. But who is to say that prayer will not influence that will? God cannot be deaf to the cry of a parent who pleads with God to create the proper circumstances for the salvation of a daughter or of a son.

What if Monica, the mother of Augustine, had fatalistically evaded her responsibility to pray for her profligate son? What if Susanna Wesley had failed to travail in spiritual birth pangs until Christ was formed in her famous evangelist son? You name them. And I will tell you that someone's prayers have been vitally related to the salvation of lost men and women everywhere. "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of," said Tennyson. And let no excuse or evasion rob you of the thrilling adventure of seeing your dear ones come to know Jesus Christ, even if you should pass the scene without seeing them converted in your lifetime. I am

persuaded you will know it on the other side. For there is joy in heaven over one sinner, that repentanteth.

And finally, we must pray with assurance for their salvation. Not only may we pray, not only can we pray, but we must pray. Souls are lost even if they belong to our family circle. I had a father tell me on one occasion not to press his son for a decision because, he said, "he is all right." As far as I know, that son is still not right with God. Simply because our children are good by some standard or another, does not mean that they are Christians. And who knows? Perhaps we as their fellow love ones, may be the only link between them and eternity. Soul winning, like charity, begins at home. Andrew brought his brother Peter, and so must we. If we do not, our dear ones may be lost forever.

Years ago, I heard Dr. James McGinley tell with great feeling how his godly mother had prayed every one of the nine children of his family into the kingdom. After James was saved, he became concerned about the salvation of his brother Reginald, who lived thousands of miles across the Canadian prairies away from the family home. "What about Reg?" He asked his mother. "When is he going to accept Christ?" To which the mother replied, "I prayed you into the kingdom. I prayed your brothers and sisters into the kingdom. And I will pray Reginald into the kingdom, too." And she did. For one Sunday morning, Reginald walked into a little church service out in British Columbia, when the invitation was given to receive Christ. And he walked up the aisle and knelt at an old fashioned altar to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal savior. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. May it be so. Now let us pray together for this last time.

Our Father, we thank you that we have been privileged during these days and weeks to minister, to our wonderful friends out yonder. We thank you for every listening heart. We pray

that many hearts will have been blessed and inspired by these messages, and that, above all, we may build a kind of home and homes, which we have tried to talk about during these days. And we would also ask you again to bless Biola, to bless the campus, bless Talbot Theological Seminary, bless all of the students who study here and to go, who go out into the world to take their place as ministers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in his precious name, amen.

Speaker 2:

Well, we (cut off).